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Producing Art in the Ruins of a Former Colonial Industrial Hub: Arts Practices in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (2000–2017)

Khanyile Mlotshwa

ABSTRACT This paper, focusing on Bulawayo, the country's second largest city and regarded as the country's cultural capital city, seeks to critically interrogate the working conditions of creative artists and other content producers against the background of an imploding cultural landscape. The paper seeks to establish ways in which cultural workers in Bulawayo negotiate the "precarious conditions" under which they work as they are exposed to the informalization of their labour, wage squeezes, temporariness, uncertainty, and pernicious risks in their work (Standing 2011; 2014; Waite, 2008; Munck, 2011). Artists in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city and the country's former industrial hub, face a harsh operating environment such that some have even quit their craft. Some of the artists interviewed have concluded that their (bare) lives are more important than the preoccupation of producing art as this has had a toll on their families. However, there still exists a handful of artists who continue to struggle against all odds with the hope of building a sustainable arts industry in the country's second largest city.

Introduction

As the Zimbabwean economy gradually fell apart in the 2000s, there has been a parallel disintegration of arts institutions. The failure of the economy has altered the working conditions for artists and other content producers in Zimbabwe. Focusing on Bulawayo, the country's second largest city that is regarded as the country's cultural capital city, this paper has two main objectives. Using data from qualitative interviews with eight artists, the paper seeks firstly to interrogate the working conditions of artists against the background of an imploding cultural landscape. Second, the paper aims to establish ways in which these cultural workers negotiate the "precarious conditions" under which they work as they are exposed to the informalization of their labor, wage squeezes, temporariness, uncertainty, and pernicious risks in their work.¹

In this article, I first lay the contextual background by proffering the history of the development of arts in Bulawayo. This history of arts is discussed in the context of the city's history as a colonial industrial hub. The paper then moves to discuss Zimbabwe's economic meltdown at the turn of the century in 2000. Here, the paper considers the debate on whether the economic meltdown was caused by the land reform program of the early 2000s or by sanctions imposed on the country after the land reform program. The next section discusses the theoretical issues around alienation and precarity. Here I consider the relationship between precarity, as espoused by Guy Standing, and the classic concept of alienation, as proffered by Marx and his intellectual followers. I also consider a postcolonial view on precarity offered by Ronaldo Munck. The larger part of the paper discusses the thematic issues that emerge out of in-depth interviews with the eight artists.

Colonial Heritage, Arts, and the History of Precarization in Bulawayo

In his award winning play, *Nansi Le Ndoda* (Here Is the Man) produced and performed in 1985, Zimbabwe's renowned playwright, director, and producer, Cont Mhlanga, tells a story of corruption, greed, and hyperinflation. The play also tackles "such and negative tendencies as [. . .] nepotism, bribery and sexual harassment at places of work and regionalism in independent Zimbabwe."² At the time the play was performed for the first time, it spoke to the conscience of the nation and won five awards at the National Theatre Organisation (NTO) annual awards in 1985.³ Among its many outstanding scenes, one stands out for its prophetic power. The lead character comes home in the evening from job hunting after his boss dismisses him from the job he held at the beginning of the play. His young brother tells him that they have run out of meal mealie, sugar, salt, and other foodstuff in the house. The young brother makes his report in instalments, mentioning each item on its own. The mention of each item comes across as a blow to the brother who can only make wincing sounds and holds his head in both his hands as if to bear the pain of it all.

This scene could have played out in some working class households as early as the 1980s when the play first produced. However, in a bigger way, the scene played out in almost every working class and middle class household starting in 1999 right through to 2008 when Zimbabwe's hyperinflation hit the ceiling, totally collapsing the economy. In 1999, the Zimbabwean dollar lost value on what economists called Black Friday, and in 2008 inflation went out of control. As a result, the government was compelled to demonetize the Zimbabwean currency, the dollar, in 2009. The playwright, Mhlanga had foreseen this drama playing out even at a time that most Zimbabweans regard as the golden era of the country's independence. It was possible for Mhlanga to see this, not necessarily because artists are seers who can peer into the future, but because of his positioning in the townships and subjectivation as working class. The French Marxist Louis Althusser posits that for Karl Marx to be able to write convincingly on the proletariat, he had to abandon his bourgeois and petty-bourgeois positions "and adopt the class positions of the proletariat."⁴ Althusser raises this point to emphasize the need to theorize from the conditions and the level of the oppressed. He privileges the position of the proletariat as the site for theory, a position "to see and analyse the mechanisms of a class society and therefore to produce a scientific knowledge of it."⁵ I argue in this paper that to produce such important art, to speak to the challenges of the working class from the mid-1980s to the current period of Zimbabwean history, Mhlanga had to be located in the trenches and the barricades where the working class struggles to survive. By extension, I locate the majority of the artists in Bulawayo in the working class category, those who are alienated from their labor and are mostly located in the townships of this city that emerges as a colonial industrial space. It is important to sketch a history of Bulawayo to properly illuminate the context in which these artists work.

Morden resembles the ruins of an industrial town with most factories in its Belmont industrial area closed down. The country's second largest city emerged in the 1940s as an industrial city central to the colonial economy of Rhodesia, a British colony. In 2014, a columnist in the state media brought the continuing coloniality of the city into focus. The Bulawayo City Council (BCC) held an elaborate function to celebrate the 120th anniversary of Bulawayo as a city, and *The Herald* columnist Nathaniel Manheru quickly pointed out how the city authorities had fallen into the colonial trap. After narrating how history has been falsified, Manheru describes the commemorations as an, "unfortunate decision to commemorate Bulawayo purportedly as "a modern city."⁶ He pointed out that such a colonial approach to history is only possible because we have failed to learn "how

to relate to colonial narratives.”⁷The columnist’s argument echoes the warning of decolonial theorists for people in the Global South to be vigilant against an uncritical celebration of modernity and coloniality.⁸ Bulawayo’s long history as an industrial capital, founded by Dr. Leander Starr Jameson, a leading member of the colonizing British South Africa Company (BSAC) on June 1, 1894, is part of its colonial legacy. This is despite the fact that Bulawayo has existed prior to colonization, built by Africans, that even colonial narratives point to the city as, “a massive, ever expanding conurbation with a cosmopolitan character, both tribally and racially, by the time it is set upon by the imperialists in 1893, in fact from the days of its Founder King, Mzilikazi.”⁹ The “modern” colonial city was established on the ruins of the throne of Lobengula Khumalo, the last Ndebele king, deposed in a series of the BSAC conquest battles in November and December of 1893. The town attained city status in 1943. Over the years, the city grew as an industrial city and an economic hub in southern Africa, and it was the second city in Africa to have its own stock exchange and one of the only two in Africa until the 1970s. The development of Bulawayo as a colonial industrial hub is linked to the subjectivation of black people, especially men, as wage laborers. Once set up as a city and an industrial hub, the settlers had to import labor, usually males, from the Ndebele villages around and other locations like Mashonaland (Northern region of what was to become Southern Rhodesia and Zimbabwe), Zambia, and Malawi. Over the years, it became law that black people could only be in the city if they had a job. As a result, Bulawayo as a colonial city excluded black women and admitted black men on the contract that they were industrial laborers. As shall be discussed later, this marked the beginning of the alienation of black people by separating them from land. Conquest and land dispossessions preceded this subjectivation of black Africans as industrial labourers.

The history of black theater in Bulawayo lies in the contrasting spaces: that of the middle class of the black intelligentsia and that of the township working class. The Mthwakazi Association of Writers and Actors (MAWA), with such notable figures as Felix Moyo and Mthandazo Ndema Ngwenya, was a group made up of mostly teachers with love for their black heritage. Amakhosi started as a Dragons Karate Club until Cont Mhlanga attended theater workshops by the National Theatre Organisation (NTO) starting in 1980 at Stanley Hall in Makokoba. The group changed from Dragons Karate Club to Amakhosi Theatre in 1981. By 1990, Amakhosi Theatre, made up of 110 young people, had appeared on stage more than 295 times.¹⁰ Its mission was to “take theater to ordinary people.”¹¹ In that the post-independence history of black theatre in Bulawayo emerges out of working class spaces, it can be argued that it is entangled in the history of the city as a colonial industrial hub. Amakhosi Theatre became a pioneering arts group in the townships of Bulawayo, inspiring an explosion of similar arts groups that were made up mostly of young people whose parents worked in the then vibrant heavy industries of Bulawayo. Mhlanga and his pioneering Amakhosi Theatre became a movement that inspired the appearance of a number of arts groups formed by young people in townships and other spaces like schools and small towns. This artistic prowess was at a time when the city of Bulawayo was economically alive and its industries employed armies of young and old people.

The city’s falling apart in the late 1990s and early 2000s, pushing many of its inhabitants including the artists discussed in this paper into poverty, coincided with the global crisis of capitalism. Importantly, it marked Zimbabwe’s own economic decline, the cause of which is debated, as discussed in the next section. The Ndebele people fondly call Bulawayo *KoNtuthuziyathunqa*, meaning “a place that continually exudes smoke.” This was in reference to the city’s big heavy industries that made it the center of industry and manufacturing in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa. A local newspaper editorial has summed up the situation in Bulawayo today in these words: “vacant factories, dilapidated

buildings, empty shops and massive unemployment all bear testimony of how the mighty city has fallen.”¹² According to newspapers, nearly one hundred companies have closed down in this city since 2010, putting an estimated twenty thousand workers out of work, with the remaining companies scaling down their operations. The Master of High Court’s roll reveals that scores of companies are applying for judicial management, voluntary closure and liquidation.¹³ This could be the crashing down of the capitalist system.

From the vantage point of his location in the township environment, Cont Mhlanga could observe the suffering that had already hit working class families, something that MAWA from their middle-class cushions could not see. In a sense, Mhlanga and his group could already understand the meaning of precarity. Mhlanga’s Amakhosi movement came at a time when artists were mostly viewed as people who had failed in life and therefore could do nothing except drama. It was at a time when the occupation of a performing artist was stigmatized as not work, in the sense of the work of a nurse or a teacher. In a sense, as popular art appeared in Bulawayo, the artists already had the label of being *waste*, a *precariat* and the *disposable*. In some cases, artists have been compelled to produce art or perform work for those who have resources like rich individuals and companies. In these cases, these artists are alienated from this work. It is work that they produce but the work turns around to undermine them. For instance, art commissioned by companies always has the ideological effect of keeping the class organization intact.

Zimbabwe’s Economic Meltdown: Land Reform, Sanctions and the Global Economy

As I have already hinted, the death of Bulawayo’s industries happened in the context of Zimbabwe’s economic meltdown at the turn of the century. Starting in the period from late 1999 to the early 2000s, Zimbabwe experienced tough economic conditions characterized by high prices, shortages of goods in supermarkets, increasing unemployment, and currency challenges as a result of inflation forcing the government to ditch the official currency and adopt a multicurrency regime by 2009. Helliker has noted that the debate over land reform in Zimbabwe has been polarized into two positions: the majority position that the program affected production and compromised food security, and the minority position that the restructuring of the agrarian sector opened up opportunities for small-scale black farmers.¹⁴ Whichever was the cause of the financial crises, the land reform or the sanctions, the crisis pushed many working-class people into poverty. Most artists come from the working class.

The land reform program must be understood in the context of history. If the development of industries in Bulawayo and subjectivation of black people as industrial labourers is linked to the land dispossession of 1890 in Mashonaland and 1893 in Matabeleland, the land reform program in the early 2000s was meant to reverse this history. Land dispossession and the alienation it caused for black people was perpetuated in the colonial Rhodesian years as black people were turned into factory laborers. However, the land reform program became a backdrop to Zimbabwe’s domestic financial crisis when economic mismanagement and greed from the elites combined with the sanctions to crush the economy. Moyo argues that the popular idea that Zimbabwe’s land reform was a failure is wrong in that, since the program aimed at redistribution, that was achieved in a large scale.¹⁵ He argues, “this is despite some elites having benefitted from the process and foreign owned agro-industrial estates and conservancies being retained.”¹⁶ In another article, Moyo posits that the land reform altered agrarian relations in that it broadened the “producer and consumption base.”¹⁷ Paradoxically it “fuelled new inequities in access to land and farm input and output markets.”¹⁸ Murisa has argued that the greatest threat to land reform has been “the threat of elite capture.”¹⁹

The sanctions that Western powers including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe imposed on Zimbabwe, especially the country's elites, after the land reform program have been discussed by scholars and government officials in relation to the global economy architecture. The government of Zimbabwe has argued that the sanctions have effectively rendered the country's economy redundant in that the country could not effectively trade with other nations. The government has gone further to characterize sanctions as part of the tools that strong and powerful Western countries have in their neocolonial toolboxes to punish and discipline the Global South. This is seen as continuing despite claims of independence for the formerly colonized world. Foster summarizes critical political economist Samir Amin's observation that the decentralization of the global economic system to the periphery, marking the industrialization of the Global South, "was not accompanied by a corresponding shift in the political control of the mechanisms of production and exchange."²⁰ Foster argues that, despite this centralisation, the "globalised monopoly capital headquartered in the centre" retained the "strategic imperialist control over accumulation."²¹ As a result of this economic inequalities between nations of the Global South and those of the Global North, Amin argues that "Third World industrialisation will not, therefore, put an end to the polarisation inherent in actually existing world capitalism."²² Amin emphasises the role of the Bretton Woods institutions—notably the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank—in the global economy.²³ He argues that these institutions have been charged with the purpose of ensuring that the economies of the South and the East are subordinated to the global economy imperatives.²⁴

Sanctions have affected artists in Zimbabwe, in general, and in Bulawayo, in particular, in a number of ways. First, the sanctions paradoxically created a situation where there was a lot of money from Western funders, which include embassies and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), for specific kinds of art and absolutely no funding for artistic themes seen as not advancing the global economic imperatives. This meant that artists were disciplined to produce art that speaks to prescribed themes, not necessarily art that sprung from their inspiration. Importantly, as audiences became poor and could not afford art, a large number of artists had to do without any form of funding. Because embassies and NGOs are centralized in Harare, artists from outside the capital city were most affected by this poverty in the country.

Alienation, Precarity, Precarization and Precariousness

From a theoretical perspective, this paper considers artists operating in Bulawayo as precariats and as alienated. Standing has noted that the middle class has splintered into two groups: the *salariat*, who are the employed, waged with non-wage forms of remuneration, and the *proficians*, who include small business people and entrepreneurs.²⁵ Standing further notes that there is an emerging class that he calls the *precariat*, who work "flexible" hours, mostly in temporary jobs, are "casuals," or part-timers.²⁶ However, Munck strongly disagrees, arguing that the so-called precariat is genealogically located in the history of marginality, informality, and social exclusion, and, especially in the Global South, it is not anything new.²⁷ For Munck, the modern concept of precariat "misunderstands the complexity of class making and remaking and [...] acts as a colonising concept in the South in classic Eurocentric mode."²⁸ This paper deploys these different readings of precarity alongside the classic Marxist concept of alienation in understanding how artists in Bulawayo make art under conditions of a failed economy.

Alienation has been described the "condition of modern man" and an "endemic condition of capitalism" characterized by a "morbid and acute social sickness."²⁹ Marx posits that alienation is linked to private property and law. The reified laws of private property arise

“out of the nature of private property.”³⁰ Workers are alienated from the labor of their minds and hands as they are viewed “just like a horse” needing “only [to] receive so much as enables him to work.”³¹ To Marx, under the alienating capitalist conditions, the worker feels that work is external to her and consequently get no fulfillment out of it, lacks physical and mental energy, and “is physically exhausted and mentally debased.”³² Alienation ties the worker to private property and to the capitalist in that, through alienation, private property overdetermines relations between people. It is “therefore, the product, the necessary result, of alienated labour, of the external relation of the worker to nature and himself.”³³

Marxists consider alienation as born out of the historical condition of capitalism, “the innermost constitution of class society.”³⁴ However, while Novack and Marx, writing from the West, separate slavery and capitalism, it has been argued that slavery and colonization of the Caribbean in 1492 marked the beginning of capitalism.³⁵ This paper, focusing on a Global South country and location, adopts this decolonial position.

Mandel traces Marx's earlier work around alienation as not focusing on economic alienation but “the alienation of man as a citizen in his relationship with the state.”³⁶ The people of Matabeleland, where most of these artists hail from, feel alienated from the state in a number of ways. All this is tied the question of their citizenship. While in the case of Marx the state was seen as not representing collective interests but those who own property, in Zimbabwe, for the people of Matabeleland, the state is a tribal creation that acts in defense of sectarian ethnic interests while oppressing those viewed as belonging to minority ethnic groups. Surrendering their individual rights to the state is seen as giving up their rights to “institutions [which are] in reality hostile to them.”³⁷ Second, Mandel emphasizes the separation of people from the means of production as the first basis of economic alienation.³⁸ The basic means of production is land. Land, even in Europe, has been a public common, freely available, but at some point in history, it became private property as people were driven from large tracts of land. Mandel notes that land dispossession in Europe are the starting point for any theory of alienation as it gave birth to the institution of wage labour.³⁹ This is also true in terms of the history of colonialism, land dispossession, industrialization, and the emergence of wage labor system in industries in Matabeleland, as discussed in the previous section.

The precariat is the modern alienated individual. Alienation is characterized by exploitation. The precariat is exploited in that they mostly do work that is counted as preparation and is largely unpaid, lack employment benefits such as pensions, paid holidays and medical coverage, among other benefits.⁴⁰ As a result of this, the precariat is heavily indebted as their wages are volatile such that “they live on the edge of unsustainable debt and in chronic economic uncertainty.”⁴¹ Standing argued that the precariat, as a class in the making, comprised of three factions.⁴² First, there are those who have fallen into this category from old working class families; second, there are migrants and ethnic minorities who lack rights tied to citizenship and the state; third are the educated, mostly young people, and old salarieds who feel the next generation of their families will be precariats.⁴³ Like Marxists, Standing believes that the alienated precariats embody political agency and could be “the vanguard of a new progressive era.”⁴⁴

While Munck agrees that globalization has “increased the precarious and insecure nature of most work,” he is, however, adamant that the precariat is not a class at all.⁴⁵ He notes that what is mischaracterized as the precariat, a new class, describes “a certain phase of Europe's post-Fordist working class history.”⁴⁶ This is because the relationships in the production of capitalism have not changed in any way. In the Global South, Munck posits that this phase of capitalism “is marked by the nature of the postcolonial state and, later,

by the developmental state where this has emerged.”⁴⁷ In the Global South, what Standing characterizes as limited forms of citizenship, the denizens, Munck argues, “have been in existence for a long time in the fraught relations between workers, the state and society in the South.”⁴⁸

In-depth Interviews and Seeking to Understand the “Other” Experiences

The research is largely qualitative and uses qualitative interviews to collect data that is analyzed through a range of textual analysis methods that include narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis. The qualitative interview is seen as a “most efficient and efficacious method for generating texts about the experiences of the people who do not themselves and on their own produce such texts.”⁴⁹ A qualitative interview is a dialogue between the researcher and the interviewee. For this paper, I interviewed eight artists practicing their craft in theater, film, music, and arts administration in Bulawayo. Among the artists interviewed, one is a musician and music producer, one is a photographer and playwright, a playwright and director, a poet and an actor, two are playwrights and filmmakers, and one is an arts administrator. These artists were theoretically or purposively sampled, targeting those who would yield good information and were available for interviews. However, largely the interviewees were selected with the aim to get a sample of interviewees who will yield relevant data.⁵⁰ While care was taken to sample across arts genres, the broader aim has not necessarily been to build a representative sampling frame but to put together a sampling frame that is “illustrative of broader social and cultural processes”^[xliv] around the way artists negotiate precarity in the arts industry in Bulawayo.⁵¹ Initially female artists were not available, as they have to rehearse the whole day and then get back home to take up household chores such as cooking and nurturing their families. However, with time some of them were able to make time to talk. The artists interviewed are mostly from Bulawayo, as a region, and not necessarily Ndebele, and therefore no issues of ethnicity arise. This is because the research focuses on Bulawayo as a former industrial hub. Among the artists interviewed, five are male and four are female. The interviews yielded “rich, detailed descriptions” of the interviewees’ experiences and narratives.⁵² The transcribed data went up to over twenty pages of transcripts typed in Times New Roman, point 12, and single spaced. The transcripts were then subjected to a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to tease out themes and narratives. CDA combines theoretical observations on the social nature of language, its functions in contemporary society and close textual analysis as a form of “social and cultural analysis.”⁵³ The study of the interviews transcripts grapples with “the circulation of meanings in society (which) includes next to language, social practices.”⁵⁴ The researcher seeks to understand how artists negotiate precarity in their work, and the effect of their choice of language in describing their experiences. In Fairclough’s model, the analysis of the communicative event focuses on the relationship between three dimensions, which are text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. The interviews are taken as communicative events here.

The Precarity of Arts Practice in Bulawayo

Actor and theater entrepreneur Mandla Moyo explicitly uses the word “exploitation” to describe the conditions under which artists work in Bulawayo. Here work refers to what the artists do, not to the idea that they are employed somewhere. Exploitation is where, as a result of asymmetrical power relations, “an actor or a category of actors uses others for their own ends.”⁵⁵ This is a “moralistic” understanding of exploitation. Moyo notes that “ever since, til today, the artist fend for himself. We contribute a lot in the entertainment programs of this country but we do it under exploitation.”⁵⁶ The phrase

“ever since” could be meant to make us look at this in a long and historic way, and “entertainment programs” refers to the cultural life of the country. His point is that for as long as arts history, in his case theater history, has been recorded, other people have appropriated the cultural value created by artists without any real benefit accruing to the artist. Moyo calls arts a “gamble.”

In the Marxist sense, exploitation is the appropriation of another’s surplus labor: “surplus labor is the amount of labour exceeding what is necessary for the reproduction of the worker’s labour power, that is for producing the worker’s living conditions sufficient for the worker’s capability to keep working.”⁵⁷ Coupled with the complaints that the interviewed artists and journalists raised on their remuneration for their creative labor, it is clear that they view their conditions from both a moralistic and a Marxist understanding of exploitation. I start by discussing the understanding of their working conditions as one of exploitation.

Exploitation

The other artists may not explicitly use the words “exploitation” or “gamble,” but in their conversations they describe conditions of exploitation. Musician Khulekani Bethule also sees the life of an artist as one of perpetual struggle and, specifically for artists in Bulawayo, it is because they have no audience. Since he attributes this lack of an audience to failure to get enough fair play on national radio stations, he believes that is likely to change, “now that two stations that promote local music have come in.” What is key to Bethule is the struggle to build an audience, which he sees as thwarted by the economic and cultural organization of arts in the country that marginalizes artists in Matabeleland with radio stations previously centered in Harare. Playwright and theater director Raisedon Baya says artists “live for the day” or “live from hand to mouth.”⁵⁸ Bethule explains how this comes to light when an artist dies:

The honest truth is that it’s no secret that most of us artists don’t have ourselves covered. We have many artists who passed away because they couldn’t afford buying medication for whatever diseases. There are cases where collections were done just to bury a departed artist.⁵⁹

Poet Bhekumusa Moyo is also frank on the situation of artists pointing out that “economically artists are just surviving. Nothing distinguishes them from taxi drivers.”⁶⁰ He however points out that artists have tried to negotiate this precarity by joining residents’ burial societies where they live. This is a case of communing in practice.

Indebted

Artists have also pointed out that at times, “family money ends up covering art expenses.” According to musician Khulekani Bethule,

Rehearsal space is usually hired, artists need transport to and from the rehearsal venue, and these days you buy electricity so as to rehearse unlike yesteryears when you could have electricity even without paying. Then there comes the critical part. That of getting paying gigs which is where money should come from. Remember I said marginalization has a big effect so the fact that this group is not known due to lack of exposure means no big promoter will consider them for good paying shows so they end up performing for peanuts in small bars. Band members will want to be paid so that they also support their families and at the end of the day there is nothing left to cover all the costs incurred.⁶¹

Photographer Mgcini Nyoni says that as a survival strategy, and due to the precarity of their work, artists try by all means to avoid debt, especially around personal accounts. He downplays debt related to production arguing, “shows are put up using partnerships, so borrowing to put up a show is minimal.” Baya tells of debts where some artists have failed to pay for public-address (PA) system’s hire, transport, or the cost of producing posters, noting that “it is sad that some artists, at the end, have elected to close shop instead of incurring a lot of debts.”⁶² Closing shop means quitting arts and taking up some other jobs. Mandla Moyo recounts how he left arts at some point to take up a job as a security guard. For other artists it means leaving the country entirely and joining the trek to South Africa.

However, in looking at the survival strategies that artists suggest, the idea of giving up on one’s craft as a strategy to survive is shocking. This could be an instance where, in Berlant’s view, “precarity is socialized into the intensification of” the work of living.⁶³ These artists’ lives that, in an abstract manner, are more important than the work they do, and in practical terms they have to take care of their bodies and the life that lives in there before thinking about a life of producing art. This is a point that is emphasised by Lorey, that precarization is linked to biopolitics because it “designates not only working and living conditions but also ways of subjectivization, embodiment, and therefore agency.”⁶⁴

Higher Levels of Education, Poor Job Profiles

Arts have developed as space dominated by low education, characterized by poor skills training or knowledge transfers. However, there has been a recent growth of education around arts as the government opened new universities, especially after 1990. The University of Zimbabwe has been for a long time now offered a theater-related degree. Lupane State University, Midlands State University, and Great Zimbabwe University, among other institutions, are the new additions to institutions that offer training in arts at a higher level. These development have been coupled with Zimbabweans going out of the country for further training in these areas, especially at postgraduate level. This has led to high levels of education among artists, yet operating conditions have not changed in any way.

Artists interviewed still speak about putting talent ahead of training, education, and skills. Baya believes the kind of arts education at universities must be changed because “arts are not benefiting from these graduates” as they don’t go into art. He suggests that “either they are teaching them wrong things at university or they are wrong candidates” and that “something has to be seriously done here.”⁶⁵ This point is also raised by photographer, Mgcini Nyoni, who argues that

There is also the issue of people who are supposed to be in other professions but are in the arts because they can’t find jobs in their preferred professions. Those think art is an easy way out and are a hindrance to the arts as their (low) passion and commitment levels are detrimental to the arts.⁶⁶

It is clear that these artists value passion and love for arts over university qualifications. This is passion rooted in talent since to these artists, talent remains supreme and is driven by love for arts.

Weak Cultural Institutions

For arts, the struggle has been to build the institutions from scratch in the example of Amakhosi Township Square Cultural Centre in Makokoba, Inkundla Centre in Entumbane, Siyaya in Makokoba, and Inkululeko Yabatsha School of Arts (IYASA) in the city center (but rehearsing at a community hall in Entumbane). It is for this reason that, Mandla Moyo

does not see the revival of arts institutions as lying in individual brilliance but emphasizes unity among artists in building these institutions. He sees strong institutions coming into being in the unity of artists' commitment to work together, arguing that "arts institutions are there but we need to play brother help brother baba, meaning we as artists must help each other to rise and shine instead of sabotaging each other especially in Matabeleland."⁶⁷

Judith Butler has emphasized the need to think about precarity "as an acknowledgement of dependency, needs, exposure, and vulnerability."⁶⁸ Her idea is that life is precarious for all people and we depend on each other to live. This is the point that Mandla Moyo could be making, that on one's own it would be hard to build and maintain arts institutions.

The Challenges of Technology

In the qualitative interviews, artists were asked to speak on technology and their work and situation. Among artists, the tendency seems to be over optimistic about technology, the over-optimism that borders on determinism in some instances. Playwright, Raisedon Baya triumphantly points out that "most of our marketing is via social media"⁶⁹ Here artists overlook the downside of this over-reliance on technology. First, while photographer Mgcini Nyoni believes there can be partnerships between artists and other professionals, and cites marketing as an example, overreliance on technology replaces the need for marketing professionals. Second, technology, especially social media, has created apathy in people reducing them to click "likes" and hearts but never attending shows. Third, overreliance on social media puts too much emphasis on making known, that is publicizing one's event, which is not necessarily selling it or ensuring that people get to attend. Issues of place in marketing the arts in Bulawayo are always overlooked as there are rarely quality shows in spaces that people can reach easily, close to where they live. This is where the creativity of a (marketing) professional is needed. Technologies are tools that still need to be deployed by a person.

However, photographer Mgcini Nyoni points to the complex relationship that artists have with technology:

Technology has both been a curse and a blessing to the arts. The mp3 format of music has made piracy very easy in the case of music and on the other hand it has made the process of being known shorter. It is the artist who can balance the tricky equation who makes it. Instead of artists organizing shows to release music, they send download links which are not monetized.⁷⁰

Musician Khulekani Bethule also sees technology as a double edged sword: "the introduction of technology has made it easier for artists to sell their art to the world but that's where piracy was born. As piracy infected the industry, major record labels/companies closed down." Piracy has been cited as a huge cancer in an industry where artists are already struggling to make ends meet. Artists calculate piracy as money lost.

Breakdown of the Donor-Centered Arts Funding Model

Mandla Moyo in his narrative traces the decline of arts on a path that is well mapped on the decline of the Zimbabwean economy:

When I began arts in 1991 with Amakhosi, things were fine. And I chose to do art as a profession, things seemed to be moving fine but there were some drastic changes in 1999 and the life of an artist was plunged in some ditch.⁷¹

Moyo idealizes 1991, the time he started in the arts, maybe because we all idealize beginnings. For the Zimbabwean economy, the year 1991 marked the beginning of the neoliberal Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP) that forced hundreds of workers out of work in Zimbabwe. The program was implemented from 1991 to 1995. Moyo may be blind to how 1999 and 2000, as a turning point in Zimbabwe's political economic make up, and later 2008, the year that marked the high point of hyperinflation, is foreshadowed in the moment of neoliberalization in 1991. In the same discussion Moyo talks of how, after 1999, artists from Bulawayo "were shut out of many programs including donor funding" and how "it became hard for us to get nominated for some award." Arts in Bulawayo have always been a donor-funded sector. It is hard to talk of a time when the arts have ever been self-sufficient. In that it has always been conceived on a business model that relies on charity from donors; the precarity of the arts industry in Bulawayo is therefore written in its genes. In the early 2000s, arts organizations had to compete with other civil society organizations for donor funds. In the period between 2000 and 2010, there has been donor fatigue in Zimbabwe and arts have been affected. The claim that if you are not in Harare it is hard to access donor funds is also made in civil society circles.

No Future Assurance

If anything marks the precarity of artists' working conditions, it is the fact that they have no medical aid, funeral policies, or retirement packages. However, photographer Mgcini Nyoni points out that "most Zimbabweans don't have medical aid, funeral policies, and retirement packages." This observation contextualizes the precarity of artists as "precarity within the general context of precarity." However, unlike fellow artists who see a solution in artists uniting and building an industry, Nyoni believes that is the job of the government. Here, he is gesturing towards a valid proposition that it is impossible for artists to build an industry in a context where there is no functional government "institutions [...] crumble at the whims of politicians, and the country's natural resources are abused."⁷² However, it will also be a difficult task for artists to bring about the ideal government.

The Challenges of Being a Woman in Bulawayo Arts

The arts in Bulawayo, like in most spaces, are gendered. This means that for women artists, over and above the crushing economic challenges, they have to contend with patriarchy in the arts. This patriarchy is linked to the question of resources. Playwright, scriptwriter, and theater director, Thoko Zulu tells of how she was hounded out of heading the Intwasa Arts Festival. The Intwasa Arts festival is an annual international festival in the country's second largest city. She posits that "men feel challenged, creatively and intellectually, to deal with a woman in a position of power. That is why they got rid of me."⁷³ According to Zulu's account, scarce resources are always at the center of these struggles. She said "they ganged up against me and fabricated stories creating a media frenzy that I had embezzled festival funds." The scarcity of resources in the arts space has exposed mostly women artists to rampant sexual harassment such that, even women in power, are not immune to this:

The fabricated stories came after I complained about what I felt was sexual harassment. A board member would call me every morning, asking about the color of my panties. At one point when I was in Harare for the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA), another phoned me around 2:00 a.m. asking about the size of my bed. Male counterparts who were leading subsectors had no respect for me, treating me like a dog. They would come to the festival office and insult me.⁷⁴

The underrepresentation of women in terms of participation in the arts is linked to the fact that women are oppressed in society. Few families are keen on their girls participating in arts because such participation is seen as risky including exposure to physical and sexual harm. In that most performances are at night, it is always argued that it is not a good time for a young woman to be away from the safety of home. One needs to have access to resources to ensure their safety. For example, they would need money to pay for a metered taxi as emergency taxis, the most common and affordable form of transport, are not safe—or they should have their own car. In most cases, well-funded arts events have been reduced into elitist spaces accessible to people who own cars and have dependable transport when the show ends around or close to midnight. Artists, especially young girls, are seen as exposed to abuse by producers, directors, arts funders, and even male members of the audiences.

Arts administrator Cynthia Mutandi notes that the economic challenges and patriarchal tendencies in arts have meant that there has always been a low turnout in terms of women artists' participation in arts. She notes that this is despite the fact that some of the arts events, such as the Intwasa Festival, that she manages, tries to create a conducive environment for female artists to showcase their work.⁷⁵ This underlies how patriarchy operates in that it structures society in such a way that even though women are the majority in any society, they become a minority in participating in public spaces such as arts. This is tied to hegemonic masculinity, where men are given a sense of entitlement, which means they can access the public space without the hindrances that women have to contend with. Most of the time, men can access the public space because they can access resources that women cannot access. This is how the broader political economy of society shapes the political economy of arts in its own image. Broadly, speaking political economy is all about the “ways in which a society provides for its needs, including the need for art as cultural expression.”⁷⁶ Bechtold, Gunn, and Hozic note that the political economy of art is tied to “its role in creating culture.”⁷⁷ In a sense, art “production, consumption, aesthetics and its social significance, public funding, and legislation all contribute to society’s cultural reproduction.”⁷⁸ In Bulawayo, like in most Global South communities, the face of poverty is female; this imbalance in accessing the cultural goods in arts is gendered because women are effectively closed out of this “cultural reproduction.”⁷⁹

In order to survive in the arts under the challenges of a crashing economy, female artists try to find arts spaces that they can access, such as the Intwasa Arts Festival. This is even though they still feel closed out of it. This is despite emphasizing that arts are a safe space for males and not female artists. One artist involved in theater and filmmaking said arts management in the city is male and she felt that as a space, the arts were “more friendly to male artists than it is to females.”⁸⁰ She said this is because the arts industry is 80 percent run by men with few women.

Bulawayo as a Victim of Harare’s Cultural Imperialism

The other challenge that Bulawayo artists have to face is that they have a thin market because they are caught between the cultural imperialism of Harare to the north and South Africa’s cultural imperialism to the south. South Africa’s imperialism comes with Western imperialism. This section will discuss Harare’s cultural imperialism, and the next section discusses South Africa’s cultural imperialism.

Harare’s cultural imperialism is captured well in the issue of language. Ndebele people are about 20 percent of the population, which means that they have a small slice of the cultural market in the country. In the context of Zimbabwe’s language politics, IsiNdebele, although

not officially considered to be a minority language, in relation to Shona, it is a minority. So all these languages found in Western Zimbabwe are minority languages although Ndebele may pretend not to be one. Nationally and in terms of function, Ndebele is indeed a minority language.⁸¹

As a result of this, Ncube and Siziba argue that “the use of Shona in national public forums, and the insistence that non-Shona people speak or accede to the saturation of this language in Zimbabwean space, are characteristic of the domination and marginalisation of minorities in Zimbabwe.”⁸² Ncube and Siziba tie these challenges around language to the “state-sponsored violence” that they argue has “been significant in shaping the subjectivities of Ndebele people and their relationship to the state.”⁸³ This has had an impact on artists, and as a result “some artists have reformulated and repackaged themselves to meet the unwritten yet palpable laws that privilege the Shona language and Shona products. These artists not only relocate to Harare, but some either sing their songs in Shona or code-mix to include Shona in their songs or do both.”⁸⁴ They argue, “the manner in which Ndebele-speakers have to perform in Shona has to be viewed within the wider socio-cultural and political context in which Shona culture and language override all other forms of authenticity in Zimbabwe. These modes of marginalisation, exclusion and silencing are manifest in the fields of arts.”⁸⁵

Bulawayo as a Victim of South Africa’s Cultural Sub-Imperialism

The other hardships for Bulawayo artists is a peculiar one. On one hand, Bulawayo is the biggest city in Matabeleland, a region that has huge historical and cultural ties with the Nguni (Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele), Sotho, and Venda people of South Africa. On the other hand, Bulawayo and other urban and peri-urban spaces in Matabeleland also have huge populations of people from the Mashonaland region who identify as Shona. This has had the implication that Matabeleland, in its urban centers, is a region that lives in the cultural shadows of both South Africa and Harare. IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, Venda and Sotho languages are spoken in Matabeleland, and most people can follow the languages. Culturally, the Ndebele share huge similarities with the Zulu, and the Zulu dominate South Africa’s cultural output. Artists in Bulawayo are therefore competing with South African artists for the hearts and souls of the people of Matabeleland. This is made a mammoth task by the fact that South African artists are supported by a huge infrastructure, in which the government and the private sector invest a lot.

In what can be characterized as cultural sub-imperialism, in many instances, South African actors and actresses have been chosen to tell the stories of the Rwanda genocide in films *Hotel Rwanda* and *Sometime in April* over Rwandese actors, for example. Extending Mauro’s sub-imperialism thesis, Bond has argued that South Africa today plays a role similar to that of Brazil in Latin America and India in Asia, where the country does not only passively accept Western hegemony but collaborates “actively with imperialist expansion, assuming in this expansion the position of a key nation.”⁸⁶ The examples of the two movies produced by Hollywood companies illustrate South Africa’s cultural sub-imperialism, which Matabeleland has felt in a specific way. This is the argument that Mandla Moyo is making when he points out that “people got used to pirating South African stuff, not because they wanted to, because in any case it was expensive for them to do that, then they got addicted to piracy.”⁸⁷ This is because people never pirate music or any piece of arts that they have not fallen in love with.

The huge urban populations from Mashonaland, culturally, responds well to music from the motherland and that is why Harare artists manage to pull huge crowds in Bulawayo. On the other hand, artists from South Africa also pull huge crowds in Bulawayo. This is a feat that Bulawayo artists struggle to achieve.

What Needs to be Done?

Most of the interviewees argue that the solution to the challenges that artists face lies in two areas. First, artists uniting “to come together and find ways of forming a sustainable burial society.”⁸⁸ The word “sustainable” stands out in Baya’s views and points to the idea of arts as a commons. Second, artists feel that, “the government must give a hand to the art sector, we need to be recognized as an industry.”⁸⁹ Musician Bethule sees the government as part of the problem raising the need that it be part of the solution: “the government should protect artists as they are taxpayers. Strict laws to deal with piracy and unscrupulous music promoters should be introduced.”⁹⁰ Poet Bhekumusa Moyo believes that, “the National Arts Council (NAC) should set schemes for artists. It’s their job to provide that guarantee.”⁹¹ The NAC is a government department under the ministry of arts.

Conclusion

This paper has described the nature of the challenges that artists in Bulawayo face because of the economic challenges that the country’s second largest city is engulfed in like the rest of the nation. A narrative and critical discourse analysis of the interviews with the eight artists revealed challenges that have been discussed under ten thematic subheadings. The first challenge revolves around exploitation where the artists said they feel used as they put in more work than what they earn out of their efforts. This is tied to the broader theme of alienation and precarity where the artists feel a disconnect between their work and themselves. Second, most of the artists pointed out how they are indebted because they have had to spend their own money to finance production costs, especially in cases where they want to produce art independently without being commissioned by rich individuals or companies. In such cases, art has become a labor of love rather than an investment out of which they expect to earn something to look after their families. Third, while arts has long been regarded as a space for uneducated young people trying to earn a living, artists are now highly educated. However, what they earn out of their work does not match their levels of education compared to other professions such as medicine or law. Fourth, the precarity in arts has been blamed on weak cultural institutions that are not able to invest in and protect artists. It would seem the arts industry is an industry that is yet to be born in Bulawayo. Fifth, the growth in technology has also been seen as worsening the precarious position that artists in Bulawayo find themselves in. However, technology is seen as a double-edged sword in that some artists use it to cut production costs as it avails cheap facilities for making and marketing art. Sixth, the breakdown in the donor-centered model of arts funding that has worked for the industry since the 1980s has been another challenge raised by the artists. Artists, like media managers, therefore, have to think of a new arts funding model that will ensure that the industry grows and is sustainable. Seventh, unlike other spaces of work like medicine and law, where the professionals there have medical aid assistance, artists operate without any assurance mechanisms that if anything happens to their health, they can be looked after. However, artists have tried to address this challenge by being part of local community initiatives like *stokvellas* (clubs) and burial societies in their working class communities. Eighth, women face multiple levels of precarization in the arts industry in that they have to put up with the general challenges that have to do with the economic meltdown and have to contend with patriarchy and the gendered nature of arts. Patriarchy is linked to the scramble for the little resources available in the arts space. Ninth, Bulawayo artists have had to struggle because of the challenges that they have had to put up related to the politics of the country and the political economy of language and culture. The political economy of language in Zimbabwe means that artists in Bulawayo, who work mostly in IsiNdebele language have a small market for their work. Tenth, and linked to the previous

point, artists in Bulawayo also have to compete with the big artists in South Africa who have a huge infrastructure that supports them. This is because of the similarities in language and culture between the Ndebele people of Bulawayo and some ethnic groups, especially the Nguni ethnic groups of South Africa.

Artists Interviewed

1. Raisedon Baya, playwright, theatre director and producer/arts manager.
2. Mandla Moyo, actor, director and theatre entrepreneur.
3. Khulekani Bethule, musician and music producer.
4. Mgcini Nyoni, photographer, playwright and arts manager.
5. Bhekumusa Moyo, poet, playwright and arts producer.
6. Ms. Thoko Zulu, playwright, filmmaker and arts administrator/manager.
7. Ms. Cynthia Mutandi, arts administrator.
8. Anonymous, playwright and filmmaker.

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